

HARIS EPAMINONDA 'CHRONICLES'

June 2010

*"... let no one be mistaken about this, a healthy pessimism may be better than a suicidal optimism. "Light, more light, were Goethe's dying words. "Less light, less light", cried Orson Welles repeatedly on a set ... In today's cinema (and in today's world) there is too much light it is time to return to the shadows..."*¹ (Raul Ruiz)

*"In normal contexts, the room, the simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on the one hand, an enlargement of the body: it keeps warm and safe the individual it houses... its walls put boundaries around the self preventing undifferentiated contact with the world... enables the self to move out into the world and allows that world to enter. But while the room is a magnification of the body, it is simultaneously a miniaturization of the world, of civilization ..."*² (Elaine Scarry)

In 'Chronicles' the artist installs five short super-8 films, filmed by her over several years, and a sound track, all in two darkened rooms – one a kind of twilight and one a deep darkness. These films record scenes and objects yet they hold no value as documents because they are not concerned with locating images and sounds in a time – and not the fallacious idea of being timeless - neither are they composed as discrete films, as a result the gap that opens is not that between sound and image or between image and psychic reality etc. but a place that could be said considers the renewal of gesture. Giorgio Agamben's discussion of the loss of gesture in the West after the end of the Nineteenth Century, sites Diaghilev, Proust, Isadora Duncan and in particular silent cinema as all concerned with what is '*slipping through their fingers*' – *gesture ... the 'gesture is the display of mediation ...it makes apparent the human state of being-in-a-medium and thereby opens up the ethical dimensions ...'*³

There is in Chronicles a sense of the artist making another world, due to the way any subjective references have been levered into other unseen territories. For Epaminonda has filmed moments that effectively split the work from any real biographical entity. 'Chronicles' enables the generation of a mood that is neither untainted or too pure, nor too intimate, for it remains intimately connected to an outside. With the effect being that we are placed just outside immediate perception.⁴

This siting of 'Chronicles' makes of the gallery spaces rooms, rooms where perhaps something unknown to us has been displaced, as if nothing has preceded this moment, including the assumed neutrality of the gallery space - these are clearly not rooms for display. Her works in other contexts are based upon a kind

of sympathy for the taxonomy of the ethnographic format while refusing it. For example in her concurrent exhibition, *VOL. VI* at Level 2 Gallery, Tate Modern the idea of display appears central yet the presentation is a kind of sympathetic deception of the ethnographic format, an uncanny mirroring. It leaves behind the mood music of conventional framing and display as a form of containment – I would say Epaminonda's work imbues these traditions with 'elan' what the philosopher Bergson describes as 'that mysterious vital principle'.

The tenderness in Epaminonda's 'Chronicles' may at first appear to not engage with a transgression of the images of the world it is refusing, it is seemingly devoid of such concerns. Yet it is precisely this light touch, intuitive approach and the works existence in its mediation that makes the exhibition space itself a threshold where it can challenge the expectations of art to be complicit in certain operations of acts and ends - the spectacle.

As it is with the artist's relation to a renewed form of the ethnographic, there is - in the spare calibration of placement within these rooms and the illusions that arise when physical space is overwhelmed - a kind of renewal of the space of memory. Whether it is in the fascination that shrouds or empowers memory or the violence enacted through the erasure of memory, the desire to aid and direct memory persists, "... *the invention of the art of memory by the Greeks with a technique for imprinting images and places in memory and using contemporary architecture for its memory places. After being supplanted by the invention of printing, during the Renaissance Giordano Bruno revived this system in a strange and brilliant occult form ... a form that moved away from physical space into the immeasurable and secret spaces.*"⁵ The way in which Epaminonda approaches memory is through an elaboration of a mood within these rooms - a melancholic gaze imprinted within.

This desire of the artist for a renewal of forms, or perhaps a transmigration of forms is present in her Polaroid works where she captures something of the fascination that the Polaroid generated at the point of its invention: that you could take an image from life, small enough to hold in your hand – a temporal topography - and observe the image developing from its foggy surface, albeit eventually to fade. Warhol too produced hundreds of Polaroid's, exploiting the imprint – the archive – of the death mask of photography through his expansion of it in the Polaroid. Epaminonda's Polaroid's in her exhibition, *VOL. I, II & III* at Malmo Konsthall, were taken of images from books, here the artist attempts to look again from the same place as the one who had looked before, where the Polaroid's become a form of homage to another 'life' and a renewal of the time in which they were taken, a renewal that has poignant echoes throughout 'Chronicles' - along with a phantom return, and perhaps a dedication, to the work of Tarkovsky through his Polaroids.⁶

Of the two rooms the first holds four projections and the second holds one - all best described as fragments. In the first room one projection chronicles the existence of, amongst many objects and images: ancient vases, Chinese porcelain, African carvings, tiny clay bowls and figurines, filmed and edited to flick from one to the other, isolated and throwing their small shadows on colored paper backgrounds. Walter Benjamin would see the quotation as a fragment, necessarily torn from its context, the context destroyed. These objects and images too may function as quotations, whose presence is what Agamben describes through Walter Benjamin, “... *the shock is the jolt of power acquired by things when they lose their transmissibility and their comprehensibility within a given cultural order.*”⁷ In ‘Chronicles’ there is no context other than a refusal of inevitability with regard to linear time, for these are filmed ancient objects marked with the patina of a recent time - the technology of modernity – they have lost their transmissibility in their given cultural order and the artist retains this loss in the image.

All of the projections in the first room are small and silent, largely filmed from a single fixed point of view, so that whatever movement there is, occurs within the image, what Deleuze refers to as ‘moving pictures’ as opposed to ‘static sections’ of movement. In other projections large clouds of dust and car fumes are churned up by a car dragging a Cyprus tree, while dogs watch from the distance, then curiously follow; another film too has these seemingly eventless images with a single palm tree in the mid-ground, ragged, with rough shelter beneath in a semi-barren landscape, while another that reaches into antiquity switches from a shot of the Acropolis, to a Pompeii so lacking in movement it could well be a filmed photograph, and a carved figure with all context removed all but pulsates against an improbably rich red background. Through all four projections in the half darkness of this first room a Mediterranean affect washes over the images, filtered through the grain of super-8.

Each film is on a loop and of different duration leaving no possibility of a return to the same configuration of imagery, to beginnings and ends. The sound track⁸ has been produced as if an infinite cache of fragments of sounds including sounds taken from nature, as with all sound taken from outside to an interior space it takes on an artificial life, though it is sonically more alive: natural sounds, silences and effects, rush crackle and slide, yet are spare, archaic, including not so much the sound of a flute as the affect of the breath passing through it, an invocation of time. In effect then all of the elements are looped while non-continuous, so that projections and sounds will return at some point to mark the haunting obsessions in the work.

A filmed fragment of a circus performance is the sole image in the second room; we could say the last room, and far darker. There is no sound here and the image is projected small in the far corner. It is as if this image holds within it the affect of renewal and return throughout ‘Chronicles’. There’s a richness

of color in Super-8 that is intensified by the circus' spectacle of color, a saturation of color so present in Epaminonda's earlier film works, taken from fragments of 1960's cinema⁹ where the artist enhances or degrades films into beauty. There is a shift in register here but one that joins in the contamination of all the elements in the work. The illusions and dramatics of the circus performances also rely upon darkness. Where the spotlight falls it also illuminates so that at times the performers too become fragments. The circus circles as does all that enter the ring, the performers, the animals, the hoops they jump through, the extraordinary transparent spinning ball generated by the performers inside, the acrobat that lies beneath the descending elephant, a tissue away from death and the audience looking, seated on the circular rim – albeit with a suppressed confusion about the fate of the creatures. As in all chronicles, however instrumental their initial purpose, they never close the circle. The artists' filming is edited and filmed to follow the circular movement of the scene and is a marked difference to the static camera featured in the films in the adjacent room – in a kind of support and echo. Perhaps it is as it was for Hans Bellmer when young, when he was fascinated by the conjurers he observed and on which he commented, “... *such a surfeit of energy demanded some kind of echo*”.¹⁰

Silence seems encoded in the very process of the artist making of the work, for it arises in and within the images as well as the archaic nature of the sound track, as if in another time they shared the same atmosphere – heightened by the fact that the sound is not produced by, but commissioned by the artist. Within this sonic atmosphere is a buried silence, a silence being sought, both in its affect and as an idea. Silence was pursued by Proust, with a literary conceit to imagine what profound deafness might see: “... *And, as upon a stage, the building on which the deaf man looks from his window – be it barracks, church, or town hall – is only so much scenery. If one day it should fall to the ground, it may emit a cloud of dust and leave visible ruins; but, less material even than a palace on the stage, though it has not the same exiguity, it will subside in the magic universe without letting the fall of its heavy blocks of stone tarnish, with anything so vulgar a sound, the chastity of the prevailing silence.*” (*The Gervantes Way vol 3 Remembrance of Things Past, pp. 97-98*)

Still a recently outmoded technology, we live with the look of super-8 through its re-articulation by artists, the media and the seductive fantasy of the chronicling of films on the Internet. However Epaminonda directs her gaze at a meeting of this technology and time. Each projection in 'Chronicles' is unstable due to the inevitable slight movement in the hand held camera, where Super-8 alludes to a proximity to the one who is filming – most apparent in home movies – here this authorship is less sure as we become aware instead a trembling of the frame, where another gaze is being offered.

In all of Epaminonda's work there is a presence of the limit where we sense a danger in the caesura: a pause between. It is not unlike what we see in the context of the abyss that the act of translation can open, where

this pause is “ *the ‘event’ that opens and closes history*”.¹¹

Notes

1 Raul Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema 2*. Publ, Dis Voir, 2007.

2 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27-59.

3 And for Gilles Deleuze “a society that has lost its gestures seeks to re-appropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss ... gesture rather than film that is the cinematic element” Quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, 1978, trans 1993, Publ. Verso.

4 Jonathan Miles, discussed Epaminondas’s work in the context of the exhibition ‘The Mystics’ incl. the work of Haris Epaminonda and Daniel Gustav Cramer, Civic Room, London 2010.

5 Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Publ. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, Preface.

6 *Instant Light, Tarkovsky Polaroids*, Publ. Thames and Hudson, 2004.

7 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, Stanford University Press, 1994 p. 106.

8 The soundtrack to *Chronicles* is produced by, ‘Part Wild Horses Mane of Both Sides’, commissioned by the artist.

9 See Tarahi III, V, VI in ‘Old Earth No More Lies I’ve Seen You ...’ .Cyprus Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale, 2007. Catalogue, Publ. Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, 2007.

10 *Hans Bellmer*, Exhibition catalogue, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2006, Publ. HATJE CANTZ.

11 See Susan Bernstein, *Memory Text: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1940-2007)* October, 122, Fall 2007, pp. 121-127.